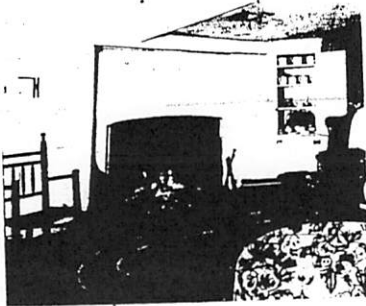


How Did You Keep Warm?

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

"How did you keep warm when you were growing up in a Duxbury winter in the late 1920's?" It was my son Paul who asked this question last Christmas Day. It was a good question to ask after 32 straight days of temperatures ranging from below zero to 20 degrees in a New England winter that broke all records since the weather bureau began 120 years ago. So it is pointless to boast, as we oldtimers like to do, about how much tougher it was to live "when we were young." I had been thinking of putting together a story that might be useful to Duxburyites today, reflecting on how we made do with unheated houses (except for the kitchen and bathroom) and firewood was the normal heating material. So first of all the answer would be that if you mean by "keeping warm," living in an overheated house with the thermostat set at 75 to 80 degrees in every room and even bedrooms provided with space heating, then the answer is, "We didn't keep warm." We were cold most of the time measured by the bloated life of modern times. Perhaps we were warm in one room, preferably an enlarged kitchen and the bathroom, but the rest of the house just waited for warm days that did return with spring.



Fireplace at John Alden House
(postcard courtesy of Bob Dente)

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People living nowadays in an inflated materialistic culture can't possibly understand what living was like in the teens and twenties, but I will try to sketch out a few things. First of all, those were active times, with everyone doing something to set forward the life of the home and family. No one could be idle. Men and boys had outside work -- tending the animals, shoveling snow, chopping wood, working at jobs that called for being outdoors at least some of the time. Women and girls had the "housework." Remember the days before cake mixes, frozen vegetables, sliced and baked bread, vacuum cleaners, electric toasters, washers & dryers, etc.? In my first parish I used to study and make hospital calls in the morning, get in my car and make calls (most of which had been asked for after church in the waiting line on Sunday), and wives were delighted to have an excuse to sit down after the drudgery of family cares (making beds, sewing, cleaning, canning, etc.). But today household gadgets and specially prepared foods have eliminated most of this. No one could possibly conceive of "fitness machines," nor was youth vandalism a problem for "only the devil finds use for idle hands." All were busy, busy, always.

Second, most important of all, a modicum of discomfort was part of the Puritan heritage. We expected to be a little inconvenienced by the cold of winter. Today we turn winter into summer by our furnaces and electric registers, and we turn summer at least into spring by our air conditioning. I don't for a minute want to disparage man's efforts to remake his environment into a comfortable place, but I would like in these words that follow to indicate a way of winter life that was livable, and that did not deplete our natural resources as our present lifestyle is doing. In fact the urgency of this issue was highlighted when I filled my heating oil tank a few days ago and paid over twice as much for it as 3 months ago. (This, I add in haste, was not the fault of my good friend, Ben Goodrich, who had rushed a repairman to rescue me when our furnace knocked out and we were saved only by electric blankets!) It was emphasized again when the Bay State Gas Company ran full page ads in all local newspapers asking people to turn down their thermostats. These 2 demonstrations of fossil fuel vulnerability have been enough to convince me that a word about how we "kept warm" in our day might be useful to *Clipper* readers.

This will serve as general background in answer to the question but there were a few details that should be looked at. I have emphasized our lifestyle as an active one which we are now compensating for by sports, recreational ventures in woods and mountains and of course by extensive exercise machines. Along with this was a diet of rich fatty food. We know the Eskimos

tolerate extremely cold weather because their fatty foods gives them an inner warmth. No one in my day ever heard of cholesterol or the dangers of too much greasy intake. (Of course I am speaking only of my own family here.) My father had a retail meat business so we had plenty of solid food, but our diet was further enriched by beans, corn products (corn muffins, hasty pudding, Indian pudding), and we always had a crock of molasses, rather than sugar. Breakfast was almost always oatmeal with bacon and eggs and toast and milk. We also had a dairy farm on North Hill and large-oyster crackers and milk often made a meal for us. The point is that rich, protein dominated food and no junk food whatsoever made up our diet.

The importance of diet was illustrated one evening right after America joined in the war against Germany in 1917. Because of vast quantities of food shipped to Europe, we had many shortages here at home and one of my most vivid recollections of World War I was my father staggering through the kitchen door one night and across the room with a 100-pound bag of oatmeal on his shoulder. He leaned down and opened the cabinet door under the kitchen sink, rolled the burden inside and then standing up faced his family (there were 6 of us children then) and said, "There by God, now my family won't starve." He knew having been brought up in Nova Scotia in greatly deprived circumstances, that a diet built around oatmeal would enable us to survive. It is interesting that contemporary nutritional experts have swung around to oats and oatmeal derivatives as a dietary panacea. We can all recall Dr. Johnson's definition of oats in his famous dictionary: "Fodder fed to horses in England and to men in Scotland."

This focus on a solid fat-filled diet with lots of carbohydrates and protein called for elaborate canning of vegetables in summer when the crops from the garden were in. In those days the few canned goods purchasable in the store had no flavor and home-preserved roughage was much preferred. Some families also bought a shoat (small piglet) in the spring and fattened it with table scraps and some grain over the summer and then slaughtered it in the fall, providing an ample supply of meat for many weeks. Frequently sections of the animal were smoked and hung in the cellar way for winter consumption. Bins in the cellar were filled also with root crops -- potatoes, beets and carrots, turnips and rutabagas. Some brands of apples and pears were tucked away as well. These and so many other items made up a robust diet for the family.

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It is important to realize, and I must repeat this to emphasize the point, we never thought of eliminating winter with gadgets, snowplows and overheating furnaces. We prepared to deal with winter as a challenge, but we respected it as something to be prepared for and dealt with. As the women of the house piled up stores of jellies, canned vegetables and men loaded the root cellar, there were other outside preparations. One important item was the placing of storm windows. This was a difficult task reaching up on a ladder to the second floor with the wind blowing. These extra protective glass coverings did a real job in helping us survive the chilly blasts. Another outside preparation was the banking of the house. This consisted of driving the horses and hay wagon down to the marshes and loading on marsh straw. This is to be distinguished from the other crop of the marsh, namely salt hay, we used to harvest and feed to the non-milking cows. This straw was found above the high-water mark and piled with stakes 3 and 4 feet high around the sides of the house forming an excellent insulation material. Of course along with this kind of outside work there was the necessity of sweeping the chimneys, the best thing for this being a branch of green red cedar. Fastened onto a broom stick and pushed into the chimney it would do a great job. Of course we never burned green wood as this would produce creosote that would build up in the chimney and after a prolonged exposure to a very hot fire would blaze away itself endangering the surrounding area.

This brings us to the greatest preparation task, namely the procuring and processing of a wood pile. Wood usually in 4-foot lengths that had been cut the year before, preferably oak, maple and birch. As boys, after school it was our first job to fill the woodbox, usually of 18-inch length and not larger than 4 inches across. Larger logs were also stacked up to use in the parlor stove.

Then there were the changes into winter clothing. I don't remember how my sisters shifted into warmer clothing, but we boys simply put on long johns. We also used to wear many woolen things, such as socks and sweaters and topcoats. Baths were limited to one a week usually on Saturday night as Mother's all day baking had warmed an ample supply of hot water.

Our house was heated principally by the kitchen stove, with the sitting room stove brought into use when the family wanted to overflow into it, plus a kerosene heating stove in the bathroom upstairs. The house had 4 bedrooms upstairs, a master bedroom for my father and mother, a bedroom for the girls and one for the boys plus a guest room in the northwest corner of the house overlooking Blue Fish River. This room was practically impossible to heat in winter. None of the

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bedrooms had any heat and in very cold weather the kitchen stove would be decorated with bricks after supper which we would wrap in newspaper and tuck into the beds. I recall vividly, climbing into an icy bed and reaching my feet down to enjoy that warmth the bricks had brought.

Stories abound of winter events coping with cold weather and often enjoying it with skating parties on Wright's dike behind the present school complex or sled riding ventures on Clapp's Hill (then barren of trees) across from Pilgrim Church. My sister Betty now in her late 80's, tells of sleighing across the bay to Clarke's Island, and Elden Wadsworth recalls the ice sailing boats used by Powder Point School boys on the bay. I remember the winter of 1918 when Gurnet Bridge was made impassable by distortions produced by ice and tidal action. My sister Ruth Krueger recalls the thermometer reading of 30 degrees below zero when all the family could do was fire up the kitchen stove and huddle around it.

I have noted in my travels the various ways different races and peoples have coped with cold. In Siberia large brick enclosures in the center of their houses with houses built within houses kept a dwelling livable. In China and Japan people wore heavy quilted clothes and heating was done by charcoal braziers. I discovered a remarkable kind of central heating in the Diamond Mountains of Korea one afternoon as I entered a village and choked on the smoke produced by cooking the evening meal with a fire under the main floor of the cottage. Keeping warm in winter months has always been a challenge to human beings and I have outlined here some of the ways we tried to be comfortable in cold times. Today probably all these methods are being applied in various locations in Duxbury but there is a new development in the use of solar heat. We have a ground floor apartment with a solar-heated kitchen in our house at the top of the hill above the Nook Inlet on Bay Rd. The house was built in the late 1700's, and so oriented that the winter sun shines on 3 sides of it. Our upstairs southeast corner bedroom is toasty warm on sunny days because of this location.

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As our fossil fuels begin to dwindle and the pollutions even from the burning wood become more and more threatening to our survival as living and breathing beings, the prospect of using solar heat looms more and more favorable. Perhaps we can also use some of the devices of our early forebears to keep warm. As I have reflected on my earlier years living in Duxbury the combination of a heavy fatty diet, extraordinary activities outdoors and in the house, a dwelling sealed and insulated and a liberal supply of burnable wood, saw us through with only minor discomfort and will do so if required again.

War Memorial

The memorial is polished stone,
Almost as smooth and cold
As jewel stone. Cool
To the fingers, the pressed hand;
A touch to remember the stone
That remembers the men.
Eyes search for a name;
We was my brother's friend.

Simple in line and plane,
The grass around falls back.
The stone is high and long,
The marble shining black.

These men and women died.
Their names were brought
To a wall in Washington
From a far land and every state,
And etched as what remains
On a stone slate.

Their monument is alive:
Eyes are scanning, arms reaching.
A child is raised,
Someone is kneeling to see,
A soldier is wheeling back.
They have come to see
The Vietnam War Memorial,
The black V gleaming,
Almost like great wings down,
Pressed against the high ground
Of the Capitol city.

The monument is pure and fine.
It has memorized every name,
Chiseled them into stone
Safe from snow and rain.

A stone softer than memory
Of pictures from Time:
The blue eyes stopped halfway down,
The black eyes still as the ground.

Margaret Cutler Chandler